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ABSTRACT

Cokeville Elementary School in Afton, Wyoming, was taken hostage on May 16, 1986. Two self-styled "revolutionaries" held 135 children, 14 teachers, the principal, and 3 other adults confined in a classroom for just over 2 hours. The siege ended violently when one of the perpetrators accidentally killed herself by unintentionally detonating a bomb. The blast injured several of the hostages as well. A review of the events reveals that the teachers and the principal coped with the situation very effectively, preventing panic both before and after the explosion and helping reduce the psychological trauma associated with the experience. The event also helped clarify how five generalizations about dealing with the aftereffects of trauma can be put into practice in a specific situation in a practical manner. These five generalizations are that: (1) willingness to be receptive to people's feelings about an event must be made clear; (2) professional psychological help must be considered; (3) a sense of order (established before the crisis) must be maintained during and after the event; (4) methods should be found to facilitate a rapid return to normalcy; and (5) traumatic events can and should be transformed into valuable learning experiences. (PGD)

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WHAT WE LEARNED

SOME GENERALIZATIONS
IN DEALING WITH A TRAUMATIC EVENT AT COKEVILLE

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THE EVENT

"This is a revolution! We are holding your school hostage!"

With this threat, a man and a woman took Cokeville Elementary School hostage on May 16, 1986. One hundred thirty-five children, 14 teachers, the principal, and three other adults were confined in one classroom for just over two hours.

The dangerously armed couple made it clear that onyone who attempted to thwart their plan would be shot. One teacher, who tried to verbally rebuff the couple, had a pistol pointed at his head and was told, "One more word out of you and you're a dead man!"

The entire story has been retold by media many times. In the end the bomb was unintentionally detonated by the woman, taking the greatest direct impact of the explosion. The only two lives lost in the bizarre event were those of the two perpetrators.

Throughout the seige, there were many acts of courage and good judgment by the Cokeville staff. Their calming influence was undoubtedly responsible for the children not being totally hysterical. Each teacher talked with his/her pupils offering solace and comfort. One teacher related that the children said they wanted their mothers and fathers. The teacher said, "I love and want my family, too. Right now I want you to be my family."

Principal Max Excell asked the couple to release the children and staff and hold only him. The couple wouldn't consider this, since holding the children was part of their fiendish scheme. When the bomb exploded, smoke filled the room within seconds. Flames spued in all directions. The heat from the blast melted diffusers on some of the flourescent lights, and they fell to the floor. About half of the lay-in ceiling tiles were blown out of steel supports. The live rifle shells in the gasoline bomb ignited, sending cartridges whistling through the room. The density of the smoke made it impossible to see beyond arm's length.

Immediately following the explosion, teachers and students sprang into action for escape. Students near the main doors ran to safety outside the building. A teacher near a door barricaded with chairs cleared a pathway. Teachers near windows grabbed children and literally threw them out. Many persons recall that one teacher repeatedly gave orders, "Kids, head for the doors and windows! We'll get you out! Hurry! Come on! Everybody get out!"

Several who witnessed the event from outside, claim that all children and teachers were free from the building in about two minutes.

* Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of NSBA, San Francisco, April 4-7, 1987.

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Consisdering the many precarious and unpredictable events surrounding the incident, it is no wonder that it is considered a miracle that no victim's life was lost. It is true that over 80 persons were treated in hospitals; three were sent to the Burn Center in Salt Lake City, but all have been released and will recover completely with proper therapy.

However, miraculous in nature, it should be noted that the persons directly involved during the crisis did many things right. The regular practice of conducting fire drills undoubtedly facilitated the safe escape from the building. Teachers who remained rational while in the tension-filled room brought calm and order rather than what might have been chaotic disaster. Principal Max Excell exercised superb judgment and dedication in his negotiation efforts with the perpetrators.

As is the case with most dramatic crises, there were numerous problems generated later which had to be dealt with. These problems centered around guaranteeing that medical needs were met, eliminating financial burdens, and minimizing psychological effects.

Costs for medical, psychological, and building reconstruction have been alleviated by insurance benefits. However, deductibles, limitations, and exclusions leave huge gaps. The school board stated that no direct costs should be sustained by any victim or victim's family. This could have created an extreme burden on the school district if it had not been for state assistance and numerous contributions to the Cokeville Children's Fund.

The post-trauma stress experienced by victims, friends, and relatives has been effectively diffused through the professional work of Dr. Nohl Sandall, school phycologist.

State Superintendent, Lynn Simons, and Governor Herschler have personally taken active roles to provide moral and financial help. We are grateful for their interest and assistance.

What is truly a marvel is how the Cokeville residents have united in love to strengthen one another. Religious, school, and community groups have coopeated to meet social, medical, and financial needs.

THE GENERALIZATIONS

The several different terribly traumatic events that may occur in any of our schools make it impractical to rehearse or drill for each type of event--except in a very general sense. What we must do is look for those things that will provide a basis for dealing with many psychological, mental, or emotional effects suffered by victims in traumatic events. Dr. Nohl Sandall, our school psychologist, tells us that this is reasonable and possible. The theories of psychology are applicable in a generalized setting. Psychic trauma, which is an individual matter brought on by situations varying in severity and circumstances, can be minimized using the principles of applied psychology.

As our school district dealt with the hostage and bombing incident at

the Cokeville Elementary School, there were five important generalizations applicable to other trauma producing events in schools. They are. (1) a willingness to be open and receptive, (2) utilization of competent professional help, (3) the need for a climate of order, (4) a concerted effort toward normalization, and (5) learn from the experience.

FIRST, there needs to be a willingness to be open and receptive to persons and their feelings about the event. This means letting folks express themselves about fears, apprehensions, dreams, anger, etc. Assurance needs to be given to persons that their feelings will be respected. No one will be laughted at or ignored. In Cokeville this was accomplished in several different ways. The community meeting provided a forum where some general instruction was given by psychologists and social workers. Questions were asked by several persons, and their questions were answered directly by Dr. Sandall or another professional upon request. Later, social workers and psychologists met with smaller groups where more questions and individual concerns could receive attention. Parent support groups and stress management classes met weekly for some time following the event. Individual or family counseling sessions were scheduled upon request. Encouragement to utilize these services came through community and church meetings as well as written notices.

SECOND, it is important to consider professional psychological help when serious traumatic events occur affecting schools. Contrary to some who say that the "head shrinks" are not needed, there was ample evidence in our district's situation to suggest otherwise. We were fortunate enough to have a skillful, sensitive psychologist employed as school psychologist. There were several offers from well-meaning psychologists outside of our state who said they would come to our community. There werealso some offers which were probably made with self-serving motives. A capable, professional psychologist especially familiar with school age children is a must. To have a psychologist who is also familiar with the community, its habits, values, and problems, just adds to the effectiveness.

The **THIRD** generalization is the need for order to prevail during and following the crisis. Of course, to expect that order will be present during or following a crisis, is folly or at best risky, if a climate of order has not been established prior to a crisis. In review, the principal

noted that students exited the building much like they had during fire drills conducted at the school. The fact that all students were obedient to instructions of their teachers while being held under hostage for over two hours is significant. Teachers told students to follow directions carefully. What would have happened if one or more students had decided to bolt during the seige? It is entirely likely that they would have been shot and perhaps killed.

Following the event, there continued to be a climate of order. There was a feeling that someone was in charge and that decisions would be made resulting in the best interests of all concerned. School board members were visible during the crisis and at special meetings held after the crisis. They were alerted and acted upon major decisions concerning the process of recovery. Yet, they provided confidence and support in a professional psychologist and school administrators so that the multitude of immediate decisions required in such emergency circumstances could be done expeditiously.

FOURTH, the purpose in all that is done is to return to normal. This means that individual mental or emotional duress is diminished so that his or her life can be similar to that which was being experienced before the crisis. The old western idea, *"If you're thrown off your horse, get back on"* is put into effect. Yet, this is done prudently. The restroom in which the perpetrator shot himself was not opened for observation by students or parents.

The formation of a group called the Cokeville Task Force facilitated the efforts to get things back to normal. It consisted of representatives from the town, school, the county, and parents. Its membership numbered sixteen people to begin with. Examples of persons involved are the town mayor, a sheriff deputy, state and county social services worker, mental health workers, county health nurse, county commissioners, and the school administration. The purpose of this group was to coordinate resources so that individual and family needs were best met. They coordinated needs assessment, mental health services, medical benefits, public information, etc. The Cokeville Childrens Fund was administered under the auspices of this task force. They also determined how state money would be disseminated to families in need. The task force tried to make everyone feel that any question or problem could be solved.

The FIFTH point that is worth making is that given any calamity with its associated trauma, we can learn from the experience. Being able to review the events of our personal lives and our society in an intelligent fashion enables us to adapt behaviors which will increase the quality of human existence. This is the essence of education. If there are changes which will accomplish the objective of safer more effective schools, those changes should be implemented.

It is said that through adversity comes strength. That principle was practiced in Cokeville, Wyoming, and with a willingness to learn, it can be practiced anywhere.